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## Book Review: *Other People's Trades*

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proceed to settle them with great ruthlessness. He does not seem to allow the public consequences of these actions to come to mind any more than he allows himself encounters with "the one man who can make me feel ashamed." He was orphaned early and brought up in Pericles' household without any close family contact at all. He flees those who are close to him all of his life. One is tempted to think of him in clinical terms. When Stone suggests him as the test of the Socratic tie between knowledge and virtue ("...if virtue is knowledge, as Socrates taught, then ...Alcibiades should have been preeminently virtuous..."), it is hard for me to imagine that he does not know that he is distorting the Socratic position. He allows himself to do it, I believe, because he, unlike Socrates or Alcibiades, is on the right side.

I have dwelt on what seem to me to be the book's weaknesses. It is passionate, powerful, and full of interesting insights too. I found Stone's discussion of Greek theatre, like his discussion of free speech, quite wonderful — something it may well be useful to share with students. Stone's discussion of the dialectic was similarly instructive, though he gives less credence to the value of a quest for ideals than I would. His discussion of the polis is lovely and in its emphasis on the centrality of logos — good rational conversation valued as an end in itself — might well be something many of us could think about more when we considered our roles as teachers and colleagues.

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Barry Castro

Primo Levi, *Other People's Trades*. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal. New York: Summit Books, 1989. 222 pages.

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Drowned and the Saved*. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal. New York: Summit Books, 1988. 203 pages.

Primo Levi's apparent suicide in 1987 shocked the literary world. Best known for his *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947), a recounting of the unspeakable brutalities he experienced in the Buna Lager at Auschwitz, Levi wrote eight books in all: *The Reawakening* (1965), *The Periodic Table* (1975), *The Monkey's Wrench* (1978), *Moments of Reprieve* (1981), *If Not Now, When?* (1982), and the two of this review. Each in some way touched on events of the Holocaust, some in memoir, some in fiction.

At his death, Levi left no explanation, no statement. Some attributed the suicide to failing health; he was 68. Others pointed to Levi's comment on the suicide of Jean Amry, also a victim of the Nazi concentration camps: "Anyone who has been tortured, remains tortured." Whatever the reason, and it is doubtful we will ever know, Levi's last two books will remain a tribute to his engaging mind and moral vision.

Though *Other People's Trades* is Levi's last published work in America, it first appeared in Italy in 1985. For my purposes its earlier publication date makes it a good starting point in examining Levi's wonderfully fertile mind. Readers who do not know Levi may be surprised to learn he was an organic chemist, who spent his professional life managing a paint factory in Turin. Indeed, his education in chemistry is one of the accidents of fate which contributed to his survival in Auschwitz, where he "worked" on the Nazi's ill-fated efforts to produce synthetic rubber.

In *Other People's Trades*, Levi's boundless curiosity and scientific training combine to produce some of the most engaging personal essays

this side of the 19th century. Written for a general audience, many of the pieces originally appeared on the Saturday literary pages of *La Stampa*, one of Italy's great newspapers. Though some touch on scientific subjects — essays, for example, on “Beetles,” “Butterflies,” and “The Leap of the Flea” — all display Levi's deep commitment to humanism. Switching effortlessly between science, politics, and literature — he even finds room for Pellegrino Artusi, whose *Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well* is Italy's best loved and most reprinted cook book! — Levi is master of the reflective essay. Whether recounting his youthful building of a clock (recorded in “Love's Erector Set”) or speculating on “Inventing an Animal,” he takes us into his confidence and shares his imaginative insights.

Though we expect trained scientists to have sharp powers of judgment (i.e., the ability to see differences between otherwise similar things), we are impressed by Levi's gift of what the 18th century called wit: the ability to see likenesses in otherwise dissimilar things. This is illustrated, for example, in “The Scribe,” where Levi explores his newly acquired computer, which he likens to a *golem*. Like the clay golem, with its superhuman powers (used to defend Prague Jews from frequent pogroms), Levi's computer blindly displays its enormous power; obedient, yet inert, these inanimate “monsters” await the intelligence their masters breathe into them. For those of us increasingly dependent upon computers, Levi's insights will strike close to home.

Collections of short, personal essays make splendid bedside reading, but readers will find *Other People's Trades* too provocative to lull them to sleep. These should be read when the mind is alert and most open to intellectual play, because each of the two dozen essays will prick the imagination, bringing delight and surprises.

Levi's last published work in Italian, *The*

*Drowned and the Saved*, returns to the central event of his life, perhaps the central event of the present century: the Holocaust. This collection of essays represents the final installment in Levi's forty-year undertaking to tell the Holocaust story he witnessed. His determination is captured in the book's motto, from Coleridge's “Rime of the Ancient Mariner”:

Since then, at an uncertain hour,  
That agony returns,  
That agony returns,  
And till my ghastly tale is told  
This heart within me burns

Both as memorist and essayist, Levi could not rest without setting the record straight, and the eight essays of *The Drowned and the Saved* complete his task.

Examining his special position to recount Holocaust history, Levi writes in his “Preface”:

...the best historian of the Lager emerged from among the very few who had the ability and luck to attain a privileged observatory without bowing to compromises, and the skill to tell what they saw, suffered, and did, with the humility of a good chronicler, that is, taking into account the complexity of the Lager phenomenon and the variety of human destinies being played out in it.

And here in the eight chapters is his final effort to clarify obscure, yet important aspects of the Nazi concentration camp phenomenon. They also represent Levi's last word in answer to the question, “How much of the concentration camp world is dead and will not return?”

In his chapter on what he calls the “Gray Zone,” Levi explains the hierarchy of camp life: from the lowly, despised Jewish prisoners (who were systematically starved and worked to death), to the *Kapos* and *Sonderkommandos*. This latter “Special Squad” was responsible for running the crematoria. After a brief stay, they too suffered the fate of their innocent victims, since the Nazis never intended word of their

bestialities to reach the outside world. But Levi will not let us condemn those who temporarily delayed their deaths by performing the Nazi's murderous chores; that is, not until we "meditate on the story of 'the crematoria ravens' with pity and rigor," and suspend our judgment. Difficult as this is for those of us spared the experience of the death camps, Levi underscores its painful reality: "human ambiguity fatally provoked by oppression."

At the same time, Levi contemptuously rejects the fashionable cant of people like movie director Liliana Cavani, who says of her Holocaust films, "we are all victims or murderers, and we accept these roles voluntarily." For Levi, this distortion in recognizing responsibility "is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is precious service rendered...to the negators of truth."

In his chapters on "Shame," "Communication," and "The Intellectual in Auschwitz," Levi fills in the picture of camp life, teaching us about its victims and ourselves along the way: about the shame prisoners experienced every moment of camp life, which was carried into civilian life after their rescue; about the impossibility of human communication, deliberately reinforced by the Nazis to further dehumanize their victims; and about the devastating effects camp life had on the intellectuals, those least prepared for its horrors. Levi is uncompromising in his assessment:

The "saved" of the Lager were not the best, those predestined to do good, the bearers of a message: what I had seen and lived through proved the exact contrary. . . . The worst survived, that is, the fittest; the best all died.

Still another painful chapter of *The Drowned and the Saved* examines "Useless Violence," that special Nazi invention of "violence as an end in itself, with the sole purpose of inflicting pain, occasionally having a purpose, yet always

redundant, always disproportionate to the purpose itself": beatings over improperly made beds or undecipherable orders; interminable roll calls in rain and snow; even the numbers tattooed on the left forearm, reserved exclusively for Jewish prisoners *because* it was forbidden by Mosaic law. Levi concludes that

. . . in the Third Reich, the best choice, the choice imposed from above, was the one that entailed the greatest affliction, the greatest waste, the greatest physical and moral suffering. The "enemy" must not only die, he must die in torment, [he] must be degraded so that the murderer will be less burdened by guilt.

In the final chapter, Levi reproduces samples of his correspondence with Germans who have tried somehow to explain the Holocaust. Their letters, collected over thirty years, range from understanding to obscene apologetics. Levi's responses are always polite, yet never wavering in his intention to hold people responsible for their actions, or inactions. He reminds his correspondents, "The true crime of almost all Germans of that time was that of lacking the courage to speak."

Let me conclude this review with a note on style because this is an area where Levi is frequently misunderstood. His previous Holocaust accounts were marked by their tone of equanimity, almost detachment. To many, *The Reawakening* seemed even to project a sweet nostalgia about the long journey home from Auschwitz, leading some critics to call Levi "the forgiver." Such a misunderstanding results from Levi's rejection of hyperbole, bombast, and high-flown rhetoric; in their place we find subtle irony, even understatement. In its patrician character his style reflects the man. It is also Levi's way of recounting experiences so horrible as to overwhelm the imagination. But in *The Drowned and the Saved* Levi is less elliptical and ascetic than in any of his previous Holocaust books. Here Levi raises his voice

while pointing an accusatory finger, stripping away foolish and fashionable Holocaust chatter.

It is tempting to end this review with a rhetorical flourish, but doing so would be false to Levi. Better to conclude by quoting his answer to the question, why continually write about the Holocaust? Because, as Levi answers, he was witness to a "trial of planetary and epochal dimensions"; and also because, as the Yiddish proverb reminds us: "Ibergekumene tsores iz gut tsu dertseylin" (Troubles overcome are good to tell).

Gilbert R. Davis

Robert Alter, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989.

Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*. Translated by Linda Asher. New York: Grove Press, 1988.

As a lifelong reader of novels (and for almost as long, a teacher of them), I have observed with dismay the gradual disappearance (scarcely too strong a word) of novel reading for pleasure. Nor do novels seem to be included in any programs of self-improvement, though not so very long ago being "well read" was an aspect of sophistication. (Jay Gatsby, as he set out to make himself over, resolved to read "one improving book or magazine" every week.) As we all know, turning on TV has replaced picking up a book. A recent article in the *Yale Review* states flatly what this means for literature:

Literature . . . is an institution of print culture, centered on the printed book and on reading and writing. The rapidly developing electronic culture is knocking the props out from under Gutenberg literature in numerous ways, ranging from increasing amounts of illiteracy and TV-watching to the proliferation of pho-

tocopying machines and tape recordings. (Alvin Kernan, "Criticism as Theodicy," Autumn, 1987)

Obviously, as stated, all literature is affected, but the novel is the most endangered species. Poetry may even flourish, especially the short expressive lyric, and poetry readings are popular. The drama, too, can survive, adapting to the new taste for spectacle by moving from talkiness to dazzling stage business. Short stories are gaining in popularity, evidently replacing novels as representing "fiction" in literature courses in both high school and college. In fact, many currently published novels are quite short, as though moving toward the short story. And, another effect of TV and cinema, current fiction tends to be photographic and non discursive in style. A recent novel by Louise Erdrich, for example, is praised for its "brilliantly hallucinatory" scenes. What I am lamenting is the old shaggy, baggy novel that carried the reader into and through a world, explaining as it went: Fielding, the Brontes, Tolstoy, George Eliot, Henry James, Faulkner. Perhaps the last of this panoramic kind to be read by both the common reader and the critic was *The Grapes of Wrath*, now fifty years old.

One might reply that these giants remain for classroom study; although gone from the backgrounds of the average educated person, they at least remain for the devoted professional. But now for the other bad news. While technological change is reducing the ranks of the general reader, the critical onslaught of the last twenty years is teaching the new members of the profession, graduate students, especially those at our most prestigious universities, that to study great literature is to chase a chimaera: not only is "great" suspect (a reflection of the taste of an elite few), but literature as a good in itself cannot be defended. Resolutely deconstructed, it dissolves into a text among others — history,